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AFAG TALK: POLITICAL IMPACT OF U.S. FORCE POSTURES

Bernard Brodie

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PREFACE

Following is my AFAG* talk just as I gave it, which is to say without benefit of either my own afterthoughts or some excellent comments offered by one colleague. The RAND reader should remember that the occasion for the original presentation placed a premium on both brevity and rhetorical forthrightness, which is to say on the avoidance of all but the most necessary qualifications.

* AFAG = Air Force Advisory Group, Project RAND.

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My subject is the political impact or influence of alternative U.S. force postures. I think I could make best use of my limited time if I examined with you an outstanding demonstration of this influence that occurred less than six months ago.

The Cuban crisis of last October is, of course, a vivid memory for all of us, and we have all heard a great amount of talk about it. Nevertheless, it has not yet been systematically explored for the guidance to be derived from it. I do not myself pretend to have analyzed it in depth, but I think I can point to some significant aspects of the case which seem not to have got much attention. I shall, however, be using this episode simply as a vivid example of a kind of dynamics which is with us always.

I could have chosen to discuss instead, for the same reasons, the more recent decision to cancel Skybolt. Certainly that decision has had deeply convulsive political consequences which were manifestly unexpected though not wholly unpredictable. However, the outstanding lesson to be derived from the unfortunate Skybolt episode is a pretty obvious one, which is that there is a political dimension to such a decision, and sometimes a pretty important one, which is not accounted for in a cost-effectiveness analysis. Another reason for not dwelling on the Skybolt episode is that the political consequences of that decision have relatively little to do with the intrinsic merit of the decision itself. One has to separate out the effects of diplomatic clumsiness as well as other extraneous circumstances -- for example, the smoldering French resentment of our conduct concerning their nuclear policy. From that point of view the Cuban episode is a more coherent

case to examine, and also affects deeper and more vital issues.

The epochal character of the Cuban crisis simply cannot be over-rated. For a moment a curtain was lifted, giving us the means of checking some old hypotheses about the Soviet Union -- and about ourselves -- as well as a burst of new insights. True, it is only a single case with inevitably special characteristics, but, fortunately or unfortunately, we are not vouchsafed many such cases for exploration, and there is much to be learned from this one.

Considering the kinds of conclusions that have already been drawn from the Cuban experience, it is obvious that wrong guesses in this area can have mischievous effects, and we are much in danger of making wrong guesses. We do, however, have means of arriving at answers that are much better than guesses. True, we cannot cross-examine Chairman Khrushchev and his colleagues about their thoughts and the reasons for their actions, but we can check their words and behavior of the crisis period in the light of what the Soviet leaders have let us know about themselves over a long period of time.

We already know a great deal about Soviet operational precepts for their political maneuvering. About a dozen years ago, one of our colleagues, Dr. Nathan Leites, published his pioneering Study of Bolshevism, an outline summary of which was published separately as The Operational Code of the Politburo. His insights on Soviet attitudes towards political advances and retreats provided us with an interpretation of Soviet conduct last October that appeared to fit all the known facts far better than any alternative interpretation known to us.

He pointed out, for example, that it is tantamount to a moral imperative to the Communist leader that he must advance against the opponent wherever opportunity affords. Any no man's land must be occupied. On the other hand, it is equally imperative that he must at no point subject to grave hazard the basic achievement already consolidated. He must, therefore, not only be ready to retreat wherever occasion requires it, but his readiness must include absolute disregard for frivolous notions of "humiliation" and the like -- provided of course, the menace is real and not fake. That was exactly how that old-time Bolshevik, Khrushchev, behaved.

Our appreciation for a very fine presidential performance in that critical third week in October should not, of course, inhibit us from deriving whatever useful lessons we can from the experience. In that spirit, we should notice first the elementary but important lesson that while a strong military posture can support a strong policy or diplomacy, it cannot substitute for it. The same posture that enabled us to force an ignominious retreat on the Russians could obviously have enabled us to keep Soviet missiles and ~~brothers~~ out in the first place. The people who elected to put ~~those~~ offensive systems in were the same people who rushed to take them out, and thus no more tough or aggressive. Clearly then we must have sent those people some badly wrong signals in the months preceding that October week.

The Soviet miscalculation, in other words, was a misreading of the implications of our conduct. By any pragmatic test, that conduct must obviously have erred in the direction of excessive tolerance. I am speaking, notice, not of a

minor probe, such as we have to expect from the Russians from time to time, but of a radical and potentially dangerous encroachment.

There has been much talk of late about "accidental war" which, it is presumed, may arise from Soviet miscalculation. Anything that we could justly call "accidental war" has in fact been extremely rare historically, and it is not clear why it should become more common in the nuclear age than it was before. Enemy perception of our intentions and our resolve may be beyond our control in any absolute sense, but it is certainly not beyond our influence. Miscalculation on their part, in other words, is something we can help them avoid. Appropriate force posture is a big help, but something remains for the tone of voice. Actually, there is much we can usefully study about the uses both of force posture and tone of voice in deterring disagreeable enemy conduct.

One might observe also that the round of applause from people like Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop at our government's restraint in limiting its demands upon Mr. Khrushchev, and in making his retreat as easy as possible for him, is based on zero evidence concerning Russian tolerance for what we would regard as "humiliation." As I have already indicated, there is presumptive evidence to suggest that on the contrary we could have made much stronger demands -- as for example insisting on the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops -- without significantly increasing our short-term risks.

Returning to the question of our military posture, it has been alleged by many, including high Administration officials, that the outcome strikingly demonstrates the

benefits of possessing local conventional superiority. By implication, the case is strengthened for further buildup of conventional arms. Moreover, such considerations are bound to affect not alone our weapons programs, but, even more immediately important, our confidence concerning our present posture in Berlin, where we do not have and cannot soon have local conventional superiority.

However, our knowledge of Soviet Communism tells us that the startling Soviet behavior in Berlin during and following the October crisis was certainly related to Cuba, and that behavior was the exact opposite of what many people in the Administration had predicted it would be. Instead of seeking to redress their damaged prestige by some sharply aggressive or menacing action in Berlin, where they enjoyed a local conventional superiority comparable to that which allegedly did so much for us in Cuba, they did the opposite. The Russians no sooner agreed to remove their missiles from Cuba than they and their East German underlings began to be more sweetly reasonable also in Berlin. This capital event was simply accepted by our leaders as a welcome bonus, when it should instead have stimulated the most searching re-examination of those premises, now demonstrably mistaken, that had resulted in the wrong predictions.

This suddenly subdued Soviet conduct in Berlin and elsewhere following the crisis is quite sufficient in itself to throw sharp doubt on the thesis that conventional superiority is what mostly mattered in Cuba. The total Soviet behavior fits much better under an alternative hypothesis -- that what surprised and sobered the Russians was our suddenly demonstrated readiness to face up to a use of force. Their being impressed with that fact seemed to bear little relation

to the character of the force initially threatened or even the special place in which we were threatening it. We have independent supporting reasons for believing that to the Russian leaders any use of force between the super-powers invokes a high risk of general war, which in October they showed themselves desperately anxious to avoid.

The amount of soul-searching among our political leaders on what the U.S. should do was no doubt minimized by the knowledge that we could do several effective things without necessarily using nuclear weapons. Local superiority in conventional weapons was thus important for its effect not so much on the opponent's thinking as on ours. It helped to circumvent a self-induced inhibition. But even our thinking was much more affected by our confidence, because of our overwhelming strategic superiority, that Khrushchev would not launch a nuclear attack on us. So far as Mr. Khrushchev's thinking was concerned, Mr. McNamara himself put it quite well before a House committee: "...in any event Khrushchev knew without any question whatsoever that he faced the full military power of the United States, including its nuclear weapons.... That is the reason...why he withdrew those [Soviet] weapons."

Actually, it appears from certain public remarks of the President, and of persons close to him including Secretary McNamara, that a feeling had obtained at the beginning of the crisis that risk of general war was not altogether excluded. After all, the Russians might march into West Berlin, or retaliate against our missile bases in Turkey. If that was the thought, we have reason to be impressed and heartened, because if a President of the United States could face up last October to a maneuver that

entailed in his mind some risk of general war, there is little reason why he or an equally staunch successor could not do the same in a like situation five or ten years hence.

The fact that it is "some" risk is what makes it possible. We rarely have to threaten general war. We threaten instead the next in a series of moves that seems to tend in that direction. The opponent has the choice of making the situation more dangerous, or less so. This is all pretty obvious when stated, but so much of the theorizing that has been going on about the inapplicability of the nuclear deterrent to the future overlooks this simple fact.

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I remarked that our President derived the support so critically necessary for his task from the knowledge, or at least the very high confidence, that the opponent would not meet our demands or even our forceful action by making a strategic strike against us. There is nothing in current trends to suggest that in a future crisis that confidence will be eroded. What is suggested, however, and what seems to preoccupy our Secretary of Defense, is that the opponent's sense of being under strategic threat by us will inevitably diminish -- that he will no longer have to fear our making a first strike against him.

Inasmuch as we have tried consistently to persuade him that the very thought of a first strike is anathema to us, and inasmuch as he was not at all without counter-threats, especially against our allies, even at the time of Cuba, the coming environmental change may not look so drastic to him as we generally assume. Besides, we will still have in 1970 that simple but tangible kind of strategic superiority demonstrated impressively by the fact that no

one free to choose would prefer the opponent's posture to ours or even be indifferent to the choice. Why, then, do we assume, as many in the Administration do seem to assume, that the opponent will have a superiority of toughness and of nerve to compensate for his inferiority in weapons?

The fact that in the Cuban crisis the opponent frantically signalled his eagerness to avoid a military showdown of any kind on any level deserves consideration with respect to both our military posture and our politics. He would not even permit a situation where one of our destroyers might shoot a shell over the bows of one of his ships. It has been relatively easy for us to accept the fact over the past year or two that the Russian is not 10 feet tall in missile strength, but much harder to read the equally unmistakable evidence that neither is he 10 feet tall in the moral intangibles of strength. We should really begin to adjust to the Soviet opponent not as he appears in a war-gaming room -- where he is always alert, aggressive, and without biases or fixations other than those we share with him -- but as our experience refined by close study tells us that he really is, which is to say, among other things, always deeply respectful of our power.

Our political leaders seem to feel that the only way to meet the contingency of the future, where we are no longer overwhelmingly superior to the opponent but merely much stronger, is to resort to weaker strategies. Else why our current preoccupation with having very large conventional capabilities for fighting a large-scale conventional war in Europe? We seem to assume that the enemy will be so aggressive that he will disregard not only our strategic nuclear deterrent, which will allegedly be

stalemated, but also our tactical nuclear deterrent. We assume he will have so much contempt for us that he will attack, or at least challenge, with non-nuclear weapons, American and Allied armies possessing nuclear weapons. Such would be boldness indeed. We ought certainly reconsider whether the enemy deserves from us any such credit for boldness before we try to impose upon our allies in Europe a philosophy of conventional war that most of them find repugnant and alarming.

A strong and consistent deterrent posture reduces to very low levels the probability of large-scale war, and at the same time it assures the preservation of everything we value. There is thus always a strong inducement to go-for-broke on deterrence. This principle was previously clouded over by the erroneous supposition that emphasis on deterrence meant "finite" deterrence, which is to say a minimal posture for war-fighting requirements in a general war. Now it is clouded over by an equally unfounded assumption that we cannot use or threaten to use on any level of fighting any kind of nuclear weapons, because such use or threat of use will set off escalation to the limitless destruction of general war -- as though the conspicuous superiority in weaponry and in skill that we can continue to enjoy on all tactical levels, and which is not excluded for the future even on the strategic level, counts for nothing.

When we erect a deterrent posture for the present or project one for the future, subtle minds can always discover certain flaws in it; but we may be sure that the leaders of the Soviet Union will be not at all anxious to explore those flaws. It is one thing for us in the Air Force and at RAND to study the present and pending weaknesses

or inadequacies in our posture and to correct those that we can correct. It is quite another for the nation to retreat because of them to a secondary and inferior line of defense. Such retreats are altogether unnecessary and unwise.